

Jethro Coffin House  
(Also known as the "Oldest House")  
Sunset Hill, off West Chester Street  
Nantucket  
Nantucket County  
Massachusetts

HABS No. MASS-919

HABS  
MASS  
10-NANT  
40-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D. C. 20240

JETHRO COFFIN HOUSE  
(ALSO KNOWN AS THE "OLDEST HOUSE")HABS  
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Location: On Sunset Hill, off West Chester Street,  
Nantucket, Massachusetts

Present Owner: Nantucket Historical Association

Present Occupant: Nantucket Historical Association

Present Use: Exhibit, open to the public

Brief Statement  
of Significance: The oldest building on Nantucket Island,  
it was restored in 1927 as an example of  
seventeenth century domestic architecture  
from which the typical Nantucket house  
evolved in the eighteenth century.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: Built in 1686 as  
a home for Jethro and Mary (Cardner) Coffin.

In 1708 Jethro and Mary, having moved away from  
the island for a few years, sold the house to  
Nathaniel Paddock. It remained in the Paddock  
family, passing from father to son as time went  
on down to 1840 when George Paddock sold it to  
George Turner.

In 1881 the heirs of George and Mary Turner sold  
it for \$300.00 to Tristram Coffin of Poughkeepsie,  
New York, and O. Vincent Coffin of Middletown,  
Connecticut.

In 1923 the property was purchased by the Nantucket  
Historical Association for \$3500. Owned by the same  
to date.

2. Date of erection: 1686. The house was built as  
a wedding present for Jethro and Mary Coffin who  
were married in 1686. (Records Nantucket Historical  
Association and those of Town of Nantucket)
3. Architect: None originally. For the restoration:  
Mr. William Sumner Appleton, Secretary of the Society  
for the Preservation of New England Antiquities and  
Mr. Alfred F. Shurrocks, an architect.

4. Original plans, construction, etc.: Not known.
5. Notes on alterations and additions: Mr. Winthrop Coffin, of Boston, a descendant of Tristram Coffin, in 1927 financed a complete restoration of the building, as far as possible, to its original condition. No attempt was made to put the inside of the house in condition for occupancy as a residence. Much of the old lathing and plaster work was left exposed to show seventeenth century workmanship. Some of the old clay interlining was left between the outer and inner walls with glass over it to hold it in place and permit it to be seen from the inside.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure: Jethro Coffin was the grandson of one of the earliest white settlers, Tristram Coffin. His bride, Mary Gardner, just sixteen was a daughter of Captain John Gardner, also an early settler, and up to the time of his death, in 1706, Chief Justice of the Island. Captain John Gardner supplied the land for the building, and, inasmuch as Tristram Coffin owned large acreage of forest at Exeter, N. H., he supplied the necessary lumber for the framework of the house and conveyed it in one of his vessels. When the house was built, Jethro Coffin and Mary Gardner were married in their own house.

An inverted horseshoe or "U" on the exterior of the chimney was probably an anti-witch device, since it was believed in those days that witches would not fly down flues protected in this fashion.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old Views: Old photographs in The Oldest House on Nantucket Island by Ida Gardner Coffin, New York: C. Francis Press, 1905; Nantucket Lands and Land Owners by Henry Barnard Worth, Nantucket Historical Association Bulletin, 1928, Vol. 2, Bull. 1 & 7. "One Hundred Years on Nantucket." The Inquirer and Mirror, 1921.

2. Restoration:

Records of Nantucket Historical Association, July 20, 1927. Report of the architect with photographs.

Journal, American Institute of Architects, June and October, 1928.

3. Bibliography:

Douglas-Lithgow, R. A. Nantucket, A History.  
New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1914.

Duprey, Kenneth. Old Housea on Nantucket.  
New York, 1959.

Fowlkes, George Allen. A Mirror of Nantucket, An  
Architectural History of the Island, 1686-1850.  
New Jersey, 1959.

Prepared by Mrs. Marie M. Coffin  
Nantucket, Massachusetts  
July, 1965

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Built in 1686, this is the oldest house on Nantucket. It was restored in 1927 by William Sumner Appleton and Alfred E. Shurrocks. This building is an outstanding example of the "salt-box" or lean-to structure typical of the early settlements on the New England coast and characterized by a central chimney and fireplace maaa, wood shake exterior, leaded casement windows in projecting plank frames.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent; careful restoration, but garret and loft of lean-to inaccessible due to failure of materials.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: 39' - 2" by 30' - 7".
2. Foundations: 1927 stone foundation built to extend below frost line.
3. Wall construction: Wood shakes of cedar, 7" exposure,  $\frac{1}{2}$ " butt, weathered grey, vertical and horizontal sheathing; gunstock posts, spaces between studs and posts of exterior walls filled with clay for insulation, plastered on the interior.
4. Structural system: Hewn oak and pine timbers; braced frame post and lintel platform system; some "gunstock" posts and a knee brace, mortise and tenon joinery with treenail fasteners; 11" by 11" plates and girts, 10" by 10" summer beams and 3" by 4" joists expoaed

(summer beams parallel long dimensions of house, let into 14" by 14" girts at fireplace and opposite walls).

5. Chimney: Central chimney mass, bricks 2½" by 4" by 9" average with ½" clay mortar joints below roof line, lime mortar above; inverted "U" or horseshoe decoration in raised brick; several courses corbelled bricks form drip course, necking and cap.
6. Stoops or bulkhead: Fieldstone entrance paver.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorway and doors: south door of vertical shiplap over horizontal boards, simple plank frame; north doorway of vertical boards.
  - b. Windows: Casement windows, one and two sash per opening, 4" diamond shaped panes sit in lead caning, horizontal wood stays, projecting plank frames with dowel fasteners also revealed at interior; small fixed sash at right of front door.
8. Roof:
  - a. Shape and covering: Saltbox roof, asphalt shingle covering, wood sheathing parallels roof shape, nailed to purlins and rafters.
  - b. Roof framing: Five bays; rafters extend from plates to ridge pole, purlins between rafters.
  - c. Scuttle in south slope of gable provides ventilation and access to roof.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plan:
  - a. First floor: Entry hall with staircase to second floor, doorways to parlor at west, hall or kitchen to the east; burning room, lean-to kitchen and buttery at north.
  - b. Second floor: Parlor chamber and hall chamber, separated by chimney mass and stairhall; loft of lean-to accessible through passage between chimney and partition of east room; stairway to unfinished garret.
2. Stairway: Stairway from first to second floor is of winders about common post (modern construction appears

to follow original lines); crude stair to garret, ladder to scuttle.

3. Flooring: Wood boards of various widths, considerable patchwork, appear to be nailed on stringers at first floor; unpainted.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Exterior walls and wall between house and lean-to are plaster over clay infill; board partitions with plaster on split lath nailed to boards; vertical board and batten; exposed surface of interior sheathing (walls show traces of lath and plaster) in second floor rooms; ceilings are exposed girts, beams, joists and flooring of second floor rooms; second floor ceilings show traces of lath and plaster; floor boards show radial saw marks.
5. Doorways and doors: Vertical board and battens, some boards with beaded edges.
6. Decorative features and trim: No decoration except for chamfered beams.
7. Notable hardware: Variety of wrought iron hinges and pintles, thumb latches and pulls; wood bolts operate with string, moving in guides and keeps; wood knobs, pulls, and pegs for hanging apparel.
8. Lighting: Modern electric, hanging devices for lamps, lanterns, and sconces.
9. Heating: Fireplaces:
  - a. Parlor, first floor: brick surround and hearth; intersections of reveals curve to meet rear wall, fire back of bricks in herringbone bond, ledge and recess to increase draft at rear; wood lug pole, oak lintel; rectangular recess in face at left opening, wood soffit.
  - b. Kitchen or hall (east room): similar, beehive oven at left rear.
  - c. Lean-to kitchen: similar, small ledges at intersections of reveal and rear wall; beehive oven in the rear wall; wood shelf as mantel.
  - d. West room second floor: similar, smaller opening; simple wood trim and mantel, plaster fragments at reveals and rear wall, raised hearth of 9" by 9" red ceramic tile, heavy wood molding accommodates raised hearth.

D. Site:

The Jethro Coffin House is on Sunset Hill, which slopes in all directions; the house faces south with the lean-to to the north. A well head and forked posts are to the east, wood rail fences surround the house yard, wood frame shingled structure to the north; clam shell walk to entrance roadway.

Prepared by F. Blair Reeves, A.I.A.  
Nantucket, Massachusetts  
September 1, 1969

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared as part of the 1969 Historic American Buildings Survey summer project of Nantucket, Massachusetts. This is the fourth project of a continuing HABS comprehensive survey of the early architecture and urban design of Nantucket financed by a grant from the Nantucket Historical Trust.

The project was under the general supervision of James C. Massey, Chief of the Historic American Buildings Survey. Project Director was Professor F. Blair Reeves, A.I.A., of the University of Florida. Student architects who assisted in the preparation of the measured drawings were John D. Davenport (Texas A & M University), Edward Bondi (University of Florida), R. Allen Eskew (Louisiana State University), and Roger H. Grunke (University of Florida). Historical information was provided by Mrs. Marie M. Coffin of Nantucket, Massachusetts. Photographs are by Jack E. Boucher of Linwood, New Jersey, and Cortlandt V. D. Hubbard of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The material was edited for deposit in the Library of Congress by Mrs. Constance Werner Ramirez, June 1971.